

Chapter 1 – Danger, Will Robinson

One late afternoon in September of 1999, I moped around the apartment I shared on South Beach, alternately considering graduate school, celibacy, and becoming one of those guys who stands around in the sun directing traffic around highway construction sites. I was unemployed, I'd been dumped by my latest boyfriend, and there was a huge zit about to pop on my forehead.

Then my best friend Stella, who is one of the top models on Miami Beach, called and told me if I could get an 8 x 10 glossy down to her agent's before five, she could get me a day's work as an extra on a photo shoot.

She had talked me into making up the 8 x 10s a few months before, but I wasn't fashion model material. My teeth are a bit crooked, my eyebrows have a tendency to grow out in points, like Fu Manchu's mustache, and I don't have the right cheekbones. Not to say I'm a dog or anything; I mean, I get my share of stares as I walk down Lincoln Road.

"You'll be in the background," Stella said. "I told my agent it was a favor he owed me. Now you'll owe me one."

"I owe you my life, Stella." I'd been dumped by a guy a few weeks before, then I'd lost my job due to budget cuts. Right after that, I'd pinched a nerve in my back that kept me flat on my stomach for hours on end. Stella had been my sole support, bringing me chocolate babka and Dr. Brown's sodas from the Epicure deli, cheering me with gossip from her photo shoots and commiserating with me about my problems.

At least I'd have some cash toward the rent, I figured. I ran the photo down to her agent's and found out where I had to go. The next morning the zit had magically disappeared, and I reported for duty to Bobby Maduro Stadium, an ancient

ballpark that had long ago been used for spring training. It was located in a slummy area of Miami, not too far from the causeway to South Beach, and by the time I showed up at eight, the prop guys had already been hard at work.

They had laid sod over about half the infield, erected a billboard in front of the old scoreboard, and decorated a quarter of the stadium with pennants and posters. I went to wardrobe, where I was fitted for an old-time baseball uniform, white with blue stripes, with blousy pants and a v-necked jersey. They gave me sneakers and a ball cap and sent me out on the field.

A dozen of us were positioned around the sod. One of the others was this guy Blue, a struggling actor who lives on the first floor of my building and waits tables at a café on Lincoln Road. For a while I watched him trying to make time with one of the photographer's assistants. Then Stella came out in a white dress that looked like Mia Farrow might have worn it in that ill-advised movie version of *The Great Gatsby*. It was flouncy and ruffled and she carried a white parasol. The photographer arranged her lounging in the middle of the field, halfway between second base and the pitcher's mound.

"Fabulous," he said, moving behind the camera. "Now give me attitude!"

I wasn't sure what kind of attitude she was supposed to give him, pretending to be some kind of odalisque in the middle of an old-fashioned baseball game, but she seemed to know, and he clicked pictures with an ecstasy I reserve for the bedroom. Until I can get a photographer (or any other man, for that matter) to act like that, I doubt I will be much of a success at high-fashion modeling.

The photographer took a bunch of shots of Stella alone, and then called, "Paavo! We are ready for you."

He may have been ready, but I wasn't. The man who strolled out of the dugout was the most handsome guy I've ever seen. At least 6'2", with close-cropped blonde hair and eyes I later saw were the same shade of blue as the deep water off

Key Biscayne. He twirled his shirt over his shoulder with a single finger, and his biceps and abs rippled as he strolled across the verdant field. My jaw dropped open and my knees got weak.

The photographer met him where Stella was lying, and spent the next two hours arranging their bodies and shooting pictures. For my time, I got paid \$150, which I was informed would be mailed to me. After turning in my costume to wardrobe and dressing in my own clothes again, I waited outside the line of big Winnebagos for Stella.

She came out a few minutes later, looking perfect as usual, as if she hadn't spent the better part of the morning sweating in the middle of a baseball field under the hot sun. "Brian! I'm glad you stayed around. I want you to meet someone."

Paavo emerged from the trailer behind her and I thought I might pass out. He was even more gorgeous up close and personal than he had been from a distance. "Paavo's boyfriend is starting a web site," Stella said. "He needs some help. You need a job. I think it's a perfect match, don't you?"

"Hi," Paavo said, sticking his hand out. Dumbly, I reached out and shook it.

"Nice to meet you," I mumbled. "You were great out there."

He frowned. "I take de clothes off and lay around on de ground," he said. He still retained a slight accent from his native Finland, as if at any moment he might sprout bushy eyebrows and begin bopping around like the Swedish Chef on the Muppets. It didn't matter; I was in love. Or lust, as Stella pointed out later.

"Here is de card for de web site," Paavo said, handing me a business card for someone called Nick Petrangelis, whose title was listed as 'Supreme Webmaster and Grand Pooh-Bah.' "I call Nick, he waits for you at de office."

I didn't move, so Stella said, "That means now, Brian. You get in your car and you go back across the causeway to the real world."

"As if South Beach is the real world," I said.

"It is for us, sweetie."

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It was lunchtime by the time I reached Nick Petrangelis's office. There was no one at the receptionist's desk so I stood there and called out, "Hello?"

A twenty-something geek in a Pac-Man T-shirt with goofy dark-rimmed glasses came past on his way to the copier.

"I'm looking for Nick Petrangelis?"

"Second office on the right," he said, nodding down the hall. "The one that looks like FAO Schwartz exploded in it."

I got to the second office and peeked around the door jamb. A blonde guy, with broad shoulders and big hands, sat behind a cluttered desk, talking on the phone. His sandy blonde hair hung down to the collar of his blue and white striped Brooks Brothers shirt.

Though he wasn't quite as handsome as Paavo, I was smitten. I like my men tall, on the husky side, and there's something about a button-down collar that makes my heart flutter. I loved the sound of his voice, too, a British burr overlaid with New York directness. Though I was there for a job interview, not a date, I couldn't help wondering how his lips would taste against mine, if he was as sexy naked as he was with his clothes on.

The walls were plastered with posters from every space movie and television show ever screened, from *Lost In Space* and *Star Wars* to *Plan 9 From Outer Space* and *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes*. One wall had been made into shelves that were packed with action figures and scale models, from the Enterprise to Obi-Wan Kenobi, to a bunch of ships and aliens I couldn't recognize.

Nick saw me in the doorway and motioned me in. "I'm Brian Cohen," I said in a low voice. "Paavo gave me your card?"

"Sure, sit down," he said. Back to the phone he said, "No, I'm here. I'm

listening.”

As soon as he hung up the phone his cellular phone beeped. “GayLife.com,” he said. “This is Nick.” He looked at me and shrugged. “Sorry,” he said, after he hung up. “It’s kind of crazy around here. So, Paavo called and said you were looking for a job.”

The desk phone rang again. “Sorry, with the receptionist out sick I’ve got to get this. If I let the programmer or the artist pick up God knows what’ll happen.”

A tall dyke with spiked purple hair stalked in carrying a bunch of pieces of paper. While Nick was talking she laid them out on the desk in front of him. “I’m in the middle of three things,” he whispered to her.

“You’re always in the middle of three things,” she said. She looked at me. “If he’s not on the phone he’s on the Internet or in a meeting or out of the office. How am I supposed to get this goddamned site designed if I don’t get any feedback?”

I didn’t know what to say so I shrugged. I always find the very aggressive dykes a little scary. I mean, I know we’re supposed to be one big rainbow family, but what do we have in common after all? She likes pussy, I like dick. I have a lot more mutual interests with straight women like Stella. At least we can compare notes on the men we’ve slept with.

With his eyes, Nick motioned me to take a look at the samples. There were five different designs. “They’re for the background of the pages,” the dyke said to me. “I don’t suppose you know anything about the Internet.”

“I know how to find my way to the naked pictures.”

She glared at me. “He has to pick one so I can get on with the layout. I’ve got to know what kind of background I’m working with.”

“Which one’s your favorite?”

While she looked at them, I considered her. She wore an orange crop top that read “I Hate This Place and I’m Leaving Soon,” khaki shorts and combat boots, and

she had three silver hoops in each ear. "I like this one the best," she said, pointing to a retro fifties design that could have been lifted from the Formica on my parents' kitchen cabinets. "But it's too aggressive. I guess we should go with one of these." She pointed to a couple that I had to agree were kind of boring.

"What about this one?" I pointed to a pattern of stylized symbols. Two male symbols, two female symbols, in a repeating pattern.

"Don't you think it's too strong?" she asked. "I mean, it might detract from the other pictures."

"Couldn't you fade it out?" I asked. "I have this friend who knows Photoshop, and he's always doing effects like that."

She considered. "Yeah, that might work." She looked at Nick. "You like that idea?"

He smiled and nodded. "Good. Thank you. For Christ's sake." She gathered her samples and stalked to the door, where she stopped and turned. "I'm Leslie," she said. "Leslie Shulewitz."

"Shalom," I said. "Brian Cohen."

"I knew it would take getting another Yid in here to get things moving," she said. "Welcome aboard the SS GayLife.com."

Nick hung up, but barely had time to say, "Thanks," before his cell bleated again. Then the desk phone rang. He looked at me and then at the phone.

What the hell, I thought, and picked it up. "GayLife.com."

The voice on the other end was frantic. "I can't do this. I can't. It's too much!"

"What's the matter?"

"My computer crashed!" he wailed.

"Bummer, dude. Did you try restarting it?"

"Yes, I restarted it," he mimicked back at me. "But I hadn't saved my

document and now it's gone! I promised Leslie I'd have it this afternoon, and now she'll cut my balls off and make them into a mobile to hang over her desk."

I decided to avoid Leslie's office based on that description. "What program were you using? Word?"

I established that he had been using Word, with Windows XP, and got him to open up Windows Explorer. "Do I have to shut down Word first?"

"Nope. Now go to the C:\windows\temp directory. Anything there?"

"A bunch of files that end in .tmp."

"Good. Now go to View, Arrange Icons, by date. Anything that's dated today?"

"Yeah, there's this tilde wrl file."

"Great! That's your file. Double click on it, and you should jump to word."

"It's there! There's some junk at the front but I can deal with that. Oh, you're a genius! I love you! Can I bear your children?"

"Not right now, thanks. Remember to save your stuff as you're working."

He gave me a big smooch that I was sure Nick Petrangelis could hear through the phone, and hung up. Nick hung up at the same time.

"It's kind of a zoo around here," he said.

"I can see."

"You seem like you know how to handle yourself."

I shrugged. "No, you're good. You worked in an office before?"

We had a couple of minutes together before the phone rang again. I ran through my work experience, Nick nodding and asking the occasional question. "I need an office manager," he said when I was finished. "Someone who can also be my executive assistant, who can pitch in and do whatever needs to be done. A kind of jack of all trades. You think you can do that?"

"I was an assistant stage manager, and a stage manager, in New York. It's just the kind of thing I did there."

The phone rang again. I stood up to go. "Listen, I can come back sometime when you're not busy."

"No, don't go," Nick said. He had a puppy dog look in his blue eyes that I fell for there and then. It was as if Paavo had never existed, nor had the idiot who had dumped me the month before. There was only Nick. A gorgeous man who was already taken.

"Get me a copy of your resume, will you? For the file. We'll talk about salary and benefits when things calm down, like after five, OK? There's a ton of stuff on the desk in the office next door," he said. "See what you can figure out." He picked up the phone. "GayLife.com, this is Nick."

I had a job. I looked up at the poster from *Lost In Space*, and even though I could imagine that robot was waving his metallic claws and saying, "Danger, Will Robinson!" I went next door and got to work.